

## Mitchell's Musings 7-30-12: How Many Polls Does It Take? Four, Apparently

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In this musing, I want to bring together three topics: First, opinion poll interpretation. Second, the issue of public pensions. Third, attitudes toward public employees.

Let's start with the first two. I have noted in earlier musings that polls seldom get at the *intensity* of feeling of respondents to poll topics. Respondents will answer questions about whatever a pollster asks, but in many cases the issues raised are not something they have been spending sleepless nights worrying about. Some respondents will answer "don't know" or "no opinion" in such cases. But such responses might suggest general ignorance about what must be an important issue. (It must be important; why else would a pollster be asking about it?) And who wants to be seen as ignorant?

The result is that for issues that are not of immediate or pressing concern to respondents, pollsters are likely to obtain answers of first impression with opinions based on the way the question was posed. Some of the opinions, if examined, may be self-contradictory. So let's go to the public pension issue. This musing is not about whether or not that issue is actually important or whether something must be done about public pensions. It is about surveyed attitudes toward that topic and about interpretations thereof.

The California Field Poll is a respected survey organization within the state. In recent years, Field has been asking questions about public pensions. A table from a recent survey can be seen below. *Note that at each date the question has arisen, more respondents (registered voters) have said pensions are either "about right" or "not generous enough" than have said they are "too generous."* But you would never know that basic fact from news accounts that draw on the poll – at least until its latest iteration.

**Trend of voter views about the pension benefits received  
by most state and local government workers  
(among registered voters)**

	<b>Too generous</b>	<b>About right</b>	<b>Not generous enough</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
<b>Late June/early July</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>
November 2011	41%	35	14	10
March 2011	42%	34	14	10
October 2009	32%	40	16	12
<u>Party registration</u>				
Democrats	26%	43	20	11
Republicans	59%	23	9	9
No party preference/others	29%	38	19	14
<u>Union affiliation</u>				
Union member in household	26%	45	19	10
Non-union household	39%	34	16	11

Source: <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2418.pdf>

Why is that? In part it is because news reporters tend to pay more attention to ongoing political debate than regular folk and reflect what political figures and proponents of various positions say. Political debate does have some effect on public attitudes, too, but probably more attenuated than for reporters. Thus, when the March 2011 poll (second poll on the pension topic) results came out, they showed an increase in those saying pensions were too generous relative to October 2009 (first poll).

That outcome was not surprising because proponents of pension limitation in California had become much more vocal between 2009 - the first poll - and the second poll in March 2011. Some of this agitation seeped into public awareness. The results were little changed by the third November 2011 poll since California's Governor Jerry Brown had been pitching a pension limitation plan in that interval. But nothing much happened on pensions at the state level thereafter other than some legislative hearings. And most of the attention of the governor and legislature became focused on the budget, not pensions. In that interval, despite some local municipal pension-related campaigns, the issue became quiescent statewide and the percent saying pensions were too generous fell by June/July 2012 (fourth poll).

That drop may have been (should have been) the trigger for news reporters to examine a contradiction in the poll results. As can be seen below, although a majority of respondents thought pensions are either about right or not generous enough, when offered a list of ways to cut pensions, respondents tended to support them. Significant majorities supported pension caps or ending public defined benefit pensions with "401k-style benefits" (defined contribution).

**Voter reaction to various proposals aimed at dealing with the state's long-term financial obligations of public employee pension and health benefits (among registered voters)**

	<b>Approve</b>	<b>Disapprove</b>	<b>No opinion</b>
<u>Establish an upper limit or salary cap when calculating pension benefits of public employees</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>8</b>
March 2011	73%	20	7
<u>Increase the minimum age at which public employees can receive pension benefits</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>
March 2011	60%	32	8
<u>Replace the current pension system for public employees with a new system that would combine 401k-style benefits with reduced guaranteed payments</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>13</b>
March 2011	52%	40	8
<u>Give state and local governments the legal authority to modify existing pension agreements with their current workers</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>8</b>
March 2011	52%	41	7
<u>Reduce retirement benefits for new employees and for the future unworked years of current employees</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>8</b>
March 2011	58%	37	5
<u>Prohibit government pension "double dipping," where state or local government workers take early retirement, begin receiving pension checks and then take another government job</u>			
<b>Late June/early July 2012</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>6</b>
March 2011	N/A	N/A	N/A

*N/A = Not asked in March 2011*

Why is there such a contradiction? Presumably, as I have also noted in earlier musings, it is because of the inadvertent poll-push discussed above. Now there are phony polls that are truly push-polls. In those cases, someone pretending to be a real pollster calls voters and in the guise of asking questions reveals negative information about some candidate or asks questions deliberately designed to produce a particular response. Pushing was not the intent, however, of the Field Poll.

But again, put yourself in the shoes of a respondent who has not paid much attention to the public pension issue. You are now being offered by the pollster a list of remedies for a problem you didn't know or even think existed. The likely deduction you would make as a respondent is that there must be a real problem with pensions (or else why would remedies be offered by the questioner?). And you would think the remedies must be in some way respectable solutions (or else why would they be listed?).

Pollsters may also try to draw connections between policy issues which respondents have not made on their own. As it happens, in November 2012, Governor Brown is sponsoring a ballot initiative that would raise income and sales taxes temporarily to deal with California's fiscal difficulties. The Field Poll asked how voters would respond to the tax initiative if *the legislature approved some kind of pension reform*.

**How legislative approval of pension reform would affect support for Governor Brown's tax increase initiative (among likely voters)**

	Total likely voters	Current voting preference on Governor's initiative	
		Yes voter	No voter
More likely to support initiative	17%	21%	11%
No effect	54	58	54
Less likely to support initiative	20	14	29
No opinion	9	7	6

As you can see from the table above, a majority of voters - whether they support or oppose the tax initiative - say explicitly that they don't see a connection between the tax question and the pension issue. But of the remainder, those who already favor the tax plan are somewhat more likely to say would support what they favor if the pension reform passed than to disfavor it. Those who already oppose the tax plan say they are somewhat more likely to disfavor it than to favor it if the legislature passed pension reform.

It seems obvious that there is little connection in the minds of voters between the two issues. But if you are a no voter, you probably have more negative feelings about the legislature than if you are a yes voter. When the pollster brings up the legislature, you either ignore it or tilt slightly toward your preconception. The connection was in the mind of the pollster, not the respondents.

Apart from what pollsters may tell you, your attitude toward public pensions is more likely to be somewhat intertwined with general feelings about public workers and government generally. Note the big gap between Republicans and Democrats on the table shown on the first page of this musing. However, public perceptions of public workers are variable.

Certainly after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, there was much praise for public “first responders.” During political campaigns in California, whether candidates or ballot initiatives are involved, TV ads often have featured police and firefighters. From time to time, incidents occur that reinforce positive public perceptions of such workers or the reverse. A recent example is the theater shootings in Aurora, Colorado in which twelve people were killed and many were injured. One commentator on that event focused on the professionalism of the police dispatcher:

*She was nowhere near the Century 16 theater in Aurora, Colorado, early Friday morning. She didn't confront the killer or stanch any wounds or drive any of the injured to the hospital. She didn't wade through the wave of panicked, fleeing people to enter that gas-filled auditorium and bring order to the chaos. She did none of these things, yet she should be counted among the heroes of that horrible night. She was the calm voice when one was most needed...*

*As the information flowed from the officers to the dispatcher, as the requests for police and rescue personnel to respond to one location and then another and another accumulated with maddening speed, as the anguished voices of the wounded filtered over the radio, this remarkable woman processed it all as calmly and efficiently as if she dealt with this sort of thing every night of her life. She communicated with her officers, with the fire department, and, as the scale of the incident became apparent, with officers from Denver and the other surrounding cities that sent people to help...<sup>1</sup>*

I have posted the 90-minute audio of that dispatcher at:

<http://archive.org/details/AuroraColoradoPoliceDispatcherTheaterShootingJuly202012>

It's something worth listening to. The recording is a reminder of public dependence on such workers in emergency situations. With public opinion on public pensions far more fluid than poll interpretations may suggest, forecasting voter actions when confronted with particular pension proposals is more difficult than many pundits seem to think. There is the old saying that all politics is local. One suspects that cutting back on public pensions might not be popular at the moment in Aurora.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Dunphy, “Aurora’s Anonymous Hero,” PJmedia.com, July 22, 2012, available at <http://pjmedia.com/blog/auroras-anonymous-hero/>.